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ABSTRACT

Contradictory predictions concerning control over negative events exist in Walster's self-protective attribution theory which maintains that on-lookers in negative situations are apt to seek control by convincing themselves that such a situation couldn't happen to them, while Shaver's defensive attribution theory suggests that in a comparable situation people are more likely to attribute the responsibility to change. A field test was utilized to survey women in three cities, by telephone, about rape prevention. Hypothesizing from the two theories, Walster would predict that the respondents feeling more likely to be victimized will be more likely to attribute effectiveness to control-maintaining strategies, while Shaver would predict the opposite. Assessment of risk by the subjects supported Walster with high endorsement for personal strategies by those judging their risk as high. In addition, respondents who believed there was no risk endorsed such strategies most of all, which satisfied neither theory. Shaver's theory received no confirmation. Passive responses were due to feelings of inadequacy among the subjects. (LS)

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Estimation of Danger and Endorsement of Self-Protection Strategies: A Study of Locus of Control*

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Running Head: Danger and Control

Danger, Locus of Control, and Self-Protection Strategies

Throughout history people have been concerned with understanding the factors that determine the directions of their lives. The Parthenon, Predestination, and est all represent attempts to attribute the control over one's day-to-day existence to someone or something, whether that be a network of gods, an evil spirit, or one's own effort or willpower. This paper examines the relationship between people's perceived risk of a negative event and their beliefs about the effectiveness of strategies aimed at controlling that event.

In the 1960's Rotter brought the control issue into the psychological literature by his scientific examination of Locus of Control. According to Rotter (1966), a major organizing principle for people is their belief about who or what controls their lives. In Rotter's scheme, some people (Internals) believe that outcomes are contingent on their own actions, through their effort or ability, while others (Externals) believe something or someone else (whether it be fate, luck, the gods, or government) controls what happens to them.

Although Rotter maintains that control attributions are relatively stable, other theorists maintain that one's orientation to control varies with different situations. This situational approach has led to two attribution theories, self-protective (Walster, 1966) and defensive (Shaver, 1970), which make contradictory predictions concerning control.

Self-Protective Attribution

Walster (1966) in positing self-protective attribution, maintains that the extremity of the outcome under consideration influences onlookers attributions of control for that outcome. According to her formulation, the more threatening the potential outcome, the greater the on-looker's need to gain control by attributing responsibility for the outcome to personal characteristics of the individual involved. Then in negative situations, by convincing themselves that the person involved is in fact quite different from themselves, onlookers can conclude that such consequences could not happen to them. Shaw and Skolnik (1971), in a refinement of Walster's theory, maintain that not the severity of the outcome but rather the valence of the outcome is the critical factor. They argue that Walster's formulation would hold for negative consequences but not for positive ones, which people would like to see caused by chance, thereby increasing the possibility that such pleasant outcomes could befall them.

Defensive Attribution

In contrast to self-protective attribution, Shaver (1970) suggests that if people feel similar to the victim of the misfortune they attribute the responsibility for misfortunes to chance, thereby reducing their own blame should such a misfortune befall themselves. Support for this position has come from work by Jones and Aronson (1973), who found that men are more likely to attribute the cause of rape to the victim than are women, and from Feldman-Summers and Lindner (1976), who found that men judge a rapist to be less guilty than women do. Feild (1978), similarly, found that men consider women more responsible for preventing rape

than women do and that men think victims precipitate rape through their appearance or dress more than women do. These studies all support the view that the less likely somone feels (s)he is to be victimized, the more control (s)he would assign to someone who has been victimized.

In summary, there are two ways in which these theories differ. The primary difference is that the self-protective theory assumes that people make attributions to gain control over situations, whereas defensive attribution assumes that people make attributions to shield themselves from blame. Another difference is that Shaver's (1970) theory of defensive attribution maintains that the more similar someone feels to a victim, the more defensive attribution will operate, while similarity is not a critical variable in self-protective attribution theory.

The Importance of Research Setting

Past research in the area of control attribution has produced mixed results. Shaver (1970) suggests that some differences in research findings might be caused by differences in the naturalness of the research situation. He suggests that a laboratory setting which elicits an analytical frame of mind (or "set") could cause respondents to suppress their urge to increase attributions of control as the severity of outcome increases, while a more natural setting might allow self-protective attributions to surface. It is unclear whether the laboratory studies of Jones and Aronson (1973) and Feldman-Summers and Lindner (1973) evoked the analytical set or one relevant to naturally occuring

events. It is also unclear whether attributions made about a particular stimulus person or about "women in general" (as in the Feild [1978] study) are similar conceptually to attributions concerning oneself (cf. Jones and Nisbett, 1971).

This problem of eliciting an artificial "set" in the laboratory emphasizes the importance of testing laboratory generated theories in the field. Field survey methods allow the researcher to examine issues which are highly salient to respondents. Testing theories in the field is particularly important when such theories are used in policy decisions. However, moving into the field involves trade-offs. Though greatly increasing external validity, fieldwork entails a loss in the precision with which variables can be defined and measured, and a loss in the ability to make causal inferences. However, since our concern is not only to develop theory but also to develop social policy, we have examined these issues in a field setting. The research focuses on control attributions in the context of protection from crime, and theories concerning control can be applied, at least in part, to this context.

Control Over Criminal Victimization

In other research addressing the issue of control in the context of criminal victimization, Kidder and Cohn (1978) have suggested two salient dimensions of crime controllability: whether the controlling action is temporally and socially close to or distant from the crime itself and whether it is seen as victim-centered (i.e., decreasing the likelihood that someone will become a victim) or crime centered (i.e., decreasing the likelihood that someone will commit an offense.) These dimensions

focus on the target of the strategy (i.e. at whom the preventive measure is aimed), rather than on the person who is taking the preventive measure. We focus on the actor rather than the strategy target, examining Personal versus Societal Locus of Control. By Personal Locus of Control we mean whether a potential victim is capable of and responsible for affecting the preventive action (e.g. by not going out at night), whereas Societal Locus of Control indicates that more general societal action is necessary to prevent the crime (e.g. by providing psychological treatment for rapists).

Since we are concerned with precautionary measures, we address the issue of control over crime by examining people's perceptions of why things don't happen, rather than why they do. In Rotter's formulation our research question translates into "Are internal or external causes more responsible for keeping you safe from harm?" In our research, we asked people how helpful they thought different strategies were for preventing rape. This approach does not correspond directly to Rotter's Internal/External formulation, since a belief in "fate" or "luck" does not lead to a strategy to avoid victimization. Our approach does, however, allow us to separate strategies which are under the personal control of the respondent (e.g. not talking to strangers, taking self-defense classes) from those which are under a more far-reaching societal control (e.g., increasing men's respect for women, providing psychological treatment for rapists). So our study includes strategies which a potential victim can do to keep herself safe as well as ones which require action by social institutions or others to reduce the incidence of rape.

Predictions from Self-Protective and Defensive Attribution Theories

These personal and social loci can be used to examine the various theoretical positions which apply to situational determinants of control beliefs. Walster's self-protective attribution theory maintains that people assign personal responsibility to victims in order to convince themselves that similar fates could not befall themselves. Though she does not address the issue directly, an extension of her logic would indicate that if people cannot convince themselves that they are dissimilar to the victim of a misfortune, they would need to attribute the responsibility for the outcome to some personal, changeable factor which they could then manipulate in order to re-establish control over the situation, still reassuring themselves that such a fate could not befall them.

As Medea and Thompson (1974) state concerning rape victimization: "If a woman can believe that somehow she got herself into the situation, if she can feel that in some way she caused it, if she can make herself responsible for it, then she's established a sort of control over the rape" (p. 105). And as Bulman and Wortman (1978) point out in a discussion of victims of spinal cord injuries, "...a motivation for the maintenance of a belief in control--i.e., those which are most readily modifiable. Thus, a victim would be most apt to attribute blame to his own behaviors if they are modifiable. If environmental factors or others are believed to be within one's control, then these too are reasonable candidates for blame" (p. 352). Within Walster's framework, one would predict that

respondents who feel more likely to be victimized would attribute more control to personal, modifiable strategies than would respondents who feel less likely to be victimized.

Shaver's defensive attribution theory (1970), on the other hand, maintains that the more likely people believe they will be victimized, the more responsibility they will attribute to chance, thereby decreasing the blame which would accrue to the respondent should such a fate befall him or her. From this theory it follows that the more likely respondents feel that they could be in the same situation as the victim, the more they will attribute control for the situation to chance, or uncontrollable forces. Extending this line of thinking into the realm of control over danger to self rather than over past misfortune to another, from Shaver's theory we would predict that respondents who feel most likely to be victimized would attribute less control to personal, modifiable strategies than would respondents who feel less likely to be victimized. Additionally, respondents who feel more threatened should attribute more control to societal strategies than would persons who feel less likely to be victimized, since such attributions would allow the similar respondent to explain a potential victimization without recourse to personal blame.

To summarize, then, for personal strategies, Walster's self-protective attribution predicts that respondents who feel more likely to be victimized, in contrast to persons who feel less danger, should attribute more effectiveness to the strategies in order to maintain control, while within Shaver's defensive attribution framework, respondents who feel more likely

to be victimized should attribute less effectiveness to the personal strategies in order to avoid blame. For the societal strategies, self-protective attribution theory makes no predictions while defensive attribution predicts that respondents who feel more endangered would attribute more control to such strategies than would ones who feel safe.

These contrasting predictions were tested with data about rape from a telephone survey which assessed attitudes toward crime.

Method

The Sample. Rape prevention items were included in a telephone survey about crime which was administered in November, 1977 in San Francisco, Chicago and Philadelphia.[1] The sample consisted of women reached through a random-digit dialing procedure and is weighted for the number of telephone lines per household reached (total weighted N[citywide sample] = 716).[2]

The Personal and Societal Strategies Scales. A list of rape prevention strategies was generated from popular books, pamphlets, and previous research on rape (Bay Area Women Against Rape, 1975; Horos, 1974; Russell, 1975; Medea and Thompson, 1974; Queen's Bench Foundation, 1976). This list was pretested on a sample of women reached through randomly-generated telephone numbers in Chicago. From our pretesting, we retained items which reflected a variety of rape prevention strategies and received high variability in responses. Respondents indicated whether they believed that for preventing rape each item would "help a great deal" (scored as 3), "help somewhat" (scored as 2), or

"help hardly at all" (scored as 1). These rape prevention strategies were then divided into those strategies which are under societal control and those which are under personal control. The Societal Strategies Scale includes items concerning providing psychological treatment for rapists, publishing names and pictures of known rapists in newspapers, and increasing men's respect for all women. The Personal Strategies Scale was subdivided into Passive and Active categories. Items in the Passive Personal Strategies Subscale include not going out alone at night, dressing more modestly, and not talking to strangers. The items in the Active Personal Strategies Subscale include carrying something as a weapon, taking self-defense classes, and fighting back against attackers. These two sub-scales combine to form the Personal Strategies Scale.[3]

Assessment of Risks. In order to assess our respondents' beliefs about their likelihood of being raped, we asked them to indicate on a zero to ten scale what they thought their chances were of someone trying to sexually assault them in their neighborhoods. A rating of ten indicated that the chances were extremely high, while a rating of zero indicated that they believed there was no chance at all. Respondents were then categorized into three Subjective Risk groups on the basis of their responses to the above question. The respondents we classified as No Risk had indicated that they felt their chances of being assaulted sexually were zero, which was described in the question as indicating "No possibility at all." We classified as Lo Risk those respondents who had

indicated they felt there chances of being sexually assaulted were between 1 and 4, and we classified as Hi Risk those respondents who indicated their chances were 5 or greater.[3]

Results

To examine the relationship between subjective risk of victimization and beliefs about self-protection, Analyses of Variance were performed on the two major scales and on the two subscales of Personal Strategies. Results of these ANOVA's are summarized in Table 1. In all cases the

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Table 1 about here
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dependent variable is the amount of endorsement given to the different types of strategies, ranging from 1 (indicating "help hardly at all") to 3 (indicating "help a great deal"), and the independent variable is one's estimate of the likelihood of victimization. As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, the Societal Strategies Scale failed to differentiate among our Subjective Risk groups. Additionally, the mean endorsement for Societal Strategies is

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Table 2 about here
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significantly higher than the mean endorsement given to Personal Strategies (means = 2.34 and 2.23, respectively; $t(695) = 4.66$; $p < .001$).

The Personal Strategies Scale and the Active and Passive Subscales do, however, reflect significant differences in the Subjective Risk gorups. As can be seen from Table 2, however, the pattern of findings indicates that the situation is more complex than either theory predicts. The ratings by

respondents who believed that there was a chance that someone would try to assault them sexually increased as their estimated risk of victimization increased. However, respondents who felt there was no chance that anyone would try to assault them sexually endorsed the personal strategies more highly than either of the other two Subjective Risk groups do.

As can be seen from Table 1, the same pattern emerges from the Analyses of Variance for the Active and Passive Personal Strategies subscales as from the Personal Strategies scale (i.e., from the two subscales combined). Again we find that respondents who believe there was no possibility that they could be approached by an attacker endorse the strategies more than the Lo Risk respondents and occasionally more than the Hi Risk respondents. However, the pattern is more pronounced for the Passive than for the Active Strategies Subscales.

Discussion

The failure of the Societal Strategies Scale to differentiate among Subjective Risk groups makes it unhelpful in comparing the theories in question. A possible explanation for the failure to differentiate among groups is that everyone felt social forces can be effective for changing the crime climate. Because of the consistently high level of endorsement given the Societal Strategies, this analysis does not serve as a test of the predictions from self-protective versus defensive attribution.

The Personal Strategies Scale does, however, differentiate among the Subjective Risk groups in a way which allows comparison between the attribution theories. Within the Lo and Hi risk groups, Walster's self-protective attribution theory receives support. Respondents who rated

their possibility of victimization high endorsed the personal strategies more highly than the respondents who rated their possibility of victimization low. Surprisingly, the respondents who believed there was no possibility that they would be attacked endorsed the personal strategies most highly of all. However, neither theory made predictions to be confirmed or disconfirmed by this No Risk group. Our findings do not contradict Walster's theory, since she has noted that in order for self-protective attribution of responsibility to occur, a person must believe that the accident or misfortune could befall him or her (1966). Shaver (1970) further addresses the issue of relevance of outcome in the elicitation of self-protective attribution, but he comments that "although it may be true that a certain minimal relevance is necessary for instigation of self-protective attribution, the threshold for that instigation appears to be low" (p. 112). In our No Risk group, we are dealing with women who believe that there is no possibility at all that anyone would try to assault them in their neighborhood. (Note: The question deals with someone trying to assault them rather than with someone successfully assaulting them.) This seems to indicate that, at least subjectively, rape was not highly relevant to these women. Perceiving no risk of victimization seems to invoke different attributional tendencies than perceiving any amount of risk does, though it is not clear from these data what factors elicit such attribution.

The fact that the pattern of results obtained from the subscales is more pronounced for the Passive than for the Active Subscale can be explained by the greater perceived feasibility of performing the passive behaviors for many women. In order for self-protective attribution to work in re-

establishing control over a threatening situation, people need to feel that they can modify their behavior in ways which will keep them safe from harm. Many women expressed concern over their abilities to fight back in an assault situation. Beyond actual physical limitation, women are not socialized to aggress. Many women feel they would not be capable of striking out, even if they knew how. The stronger self-protective attribution effects for those strategies which involve passive behaviors could be caused by more women feeling such strategies are within their behaviors repertoire.

None of our analyses has confirmed Shaver's defensive attribution theory. As the perceived likelihood of victimization increases, people's attributions of effectiveness (and thereby implicit control) for personal strategies increases rather than decreases as the theory would predict. We believe our survey elicited natural, non-analytical responses, if for no other reason than that the nature of these analyses could not have been evident from the questions asked. We feel this justifies the precision we lost in leaving the laboratory. From these findings it seems clear that subjective risk of victimization or negative outcomes is an important variable for understanding control attributions and that in real world settings people strive to regain control rather than to avoid blame.

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Footnotes

1. Our telephone survey was designed and developed jointly with the Reactions to Crime project (funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration) which is also being directed from the Center for Urban Affairs at Northwestern University. The interviewing was sub-contracted to Market Opinion Research of Detroit.
2. The survey also includes samples based on neighborhood residence. The overall weighted N for women in the survey is 2006.
3. The following are the survey items contained in each scale and subscale:

   Personal Strategies Scale

   Passive Subscale

   - Women not going out alone, especially at night.
   - Women dressing more modestly, or in a less sexy way.
   - Women refusing to talk to strangers.

   Active Subscale

   - Encouraging women to take self-defense classes, like judo or karate.
   - Women carrying weapons for protection, like knives or guns.
   - Rape victims fighting back against their attackers.

   Societal Strategies Scale

   - Providing psychological treatment for rapists.
   - Newspapers publicizing names and pictures of known rapists.
   - Increasing men's respect for all women.

4. The N's for the No, Lo, and Hi risk groups are 233, 135, and 129 respectively. Missing data = 219.

Table 1

Summaries of the Analyses of Variance

for Impact of Subjective Risk of Victimization on

Endorsement of Prevention Strategy Scales and Subscales

Scale or Subscale	F	df	Significance Level
Personal	9.9789	2,561	$p < .001$
Active	3.1562	2,558	$p < .05$
Passive	8.8130	2,560	$p < .001$
Societal	.9880	2,558	n.s.

Table 2

Mean Endorsement of Self-Protection Scales and Subscales by Subjective Risk Category

	Subjective Risk Group		
Mean Endorsement of:	No	Lo	Hi
Personal Strategies Scale	2.29	2.13	2.28
Active Subscale	2.12	2.02	2.15
Passive Subscale	2.45	2.23	2.40
Societal Strategies Scale	2.37	2.30	2.36